

Free to Serve!

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Community Christian Church

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The third part of our mission statement reads: “to share God's love for us through compassionate service to others.” Last week we touched on sharing in the midst of God's love. This week, let us focus our minds and hearts on service, on what it means to serve one another as children loved by a gracious God.

Galatians 5: 13-14; Pew Bible pg. 1815

Prayer: God make yourself known to us through these words. As we continue to listen for your voice, quiet the busyness of our minds, calm the restlessness of our hearts, and soothe the troubles of our souls. Bless my words and our attention with the fruit of understanding. Amen.

One of my football coaches in college loved to condition us. At the end of every practice, we were guaranteed to have some kind of conditioning exercise. This coach would line us up in a particular configuration and tell us to do certain things. Whatever he told us to do, we did. If he said “jump,” we jumped. If he said “hit it,” we fell to our chests. It was like a sick game of “Simon Says”: the conditioning edition.

If we didn't follow his directions exactly, then he would yell “run!” And we would run.

Now this coach was witty and he loved to ensure that we would end up running. Like clockwork, he would shout “jump!” And we would jump as high as we could, only to land and hear him say, “I didn't tell you to come back down!” And then every one of us would have to do what we hated to do: run.... I remember seeing the confused and discouraged looks on each one of the freshman's faces—those poor guys were still trying to figure out how they could levitate.

But we were not free to float, we had to come back down—and the consequence of gravity, according to my devious coach, was a lot of running. And we hated running.

Running felt like a punishment to us. It brought us fatigue, soreness, and thirst—and we were instructed, commanded, to do it. Sure, we knew in the long run we would be better for it; better athletes with more endurance to finish a game. But if you've ever done chores, if you've ever felt that heavy, dread in the pit of your stomach come chore time; then you know how so many of us felt about running. If we could have avoided it, we would have.

I think serving others can feel like a chore sometimes—and, sometimes, maybe even like a kind of punishment. If you've ever served on a church committee you likely know the feeling—meetings, duties, reports... we'd rather be doing something else—something fun, something with friends or family, something for ourselves, something we want to do.

Serving others can feel like a heavy obligation where the duty keeps us focused on what we are doing, on the tediousness of the task, on the effort we are giving, on all the things we are giving up. And the people we are helping, the good we are doing, or the meaning of our work—that all sinks under the weight of our obligation.

And so, serving one another can feel like a pile of stones blocking our path. We treat that pile of stones

as a dreaded obstacle, something to be moved so we can get on with the rest of our lives.

The problem may be that serving others doesn't always feel like something we do freely. After all, when we talk about people in prison, we often say that they are “serving time.” Service, then, may bring us a sense of imprisonment to our obligations as a Christian. Service becomes more like a chore our parents told us we had to do “just because.” If we could avoid it, we would.

If only we could proceed unimpeded—to march forward with our lives without the chore of serving others. What a freedom that would be!

Our scripture passage this morning is part of Paul's campaign to proclaim the joys of freedom—but not just any freedom. Paul stands in a rich biblical heritage of freedom that, in the New Testament, centers on the event of Jesus Christ. Paul advanced a gospel of freedom proclaiming that “Christ has set us free” (Galatians 5:1).

Yet, as Paul indicates in verse 13 of our passage this morning, freedom here is not for “the sinful nature;” or, in other translations, freedom is not to be used for “self-indulgence.” In other words, freedom is not doing whatever we please.

As a teenager, I loved to remind my parents that, “as an American, I am free—and that means I don't have to listen to you. I can do whatever I want!” My principled protests often resulted in the exercise of my parents' freedom to prevent me from driving their car.

But if Paul were to answer my adolescent anger, he would remind me that doing whatever we please is not true freedom. Doing whatever we please is still a captivity to our own desires, desires that are no bigger than our own selves. The Greek word Paul uses, which is translated “sinful nature” in the NIV and “self-indulgence” in other versions, is the Greek word *sarx*, literally meaning “flesh.” For Paul, “the flesh” is both something about us (like our material bodies and internal desires), and yet also some cosmic force outside us, threatening us.

Paul reminds us in Romans that we are always serving something or someone—its always a matter of what or who. And so our flesh, our *sarx* is the complement of internal desire and external force commanding us to do simply as we please, without regard for the lives of others.

For Paul, then, freedom is the power to resist both internal desires and the external forces which ask us to do only what we please—to serve ourselves alone. Freedom is the power to overcome a bondage to ourselves that places our own short-sighted desires at the pinnacle of the universe.

One day at football practice, as I watched the track athletes run their umpteenth lap around our field, I remember thinking, “Wow, their sport is our punishment. If I could love running like they do, football practice would be great!” But it is hard to turn something that feels like a punishment into something enjoyable, something desired.

And this is Paul's point—we can't simply change what we love. We need some help. This is precisely the power of Christ—the power to help us overcome our self-indulgence. The power to say “yes” to service, to say “yes” to others, to say “yes” to a life that is beyond just me—a life that is bigger, wider, and truer. With Christ, what we desire, what we love, is remade to include the lives of others, the lives of our neighbors. And choosing a life where our desire is remade with Christ; this is true freedom! It is the freedom, as Paul states, to “serve one another in love”!

The key here is that our heart, through faith in Christ, has changed to include the lives of those we serve, to care for people beyond ourselves, to live in love for the good of all. We are no longer focused on the service, on the duty, on the obligation. We are focused on the people, on the good, on the great

meaning of our service in Christ.

And so, as a church, I invite you to consider our calling to “compassionate service.” We are not called to chore-like service. Chore-like service is not grounded in the freedom of Christ, it is grounded in indifference. When service feels like a chore it is because we are focused on the duty, the obligation, the prison of service and we quickly become indifferent to others. Sure, we may know, in our minds, that we are helping others, but our hearts are focused on the chore, on the task, on the obligation. Elie Wiesel writes that “the opposite of love is not hate, it is indifference... The opposite of faith is not heresy, it is indifference. The opposite of life is not death, it is indifference.” With Christ, indifference for others is replaced with a love that drives service toward immense joy.

With Christ, we are freed from a life where service is a chore, to a life where service is a labor of love; a love that leaves our chores in the dust of simple self-indulgence. And in this way who we are grows and enlarges—we find our true selves in a life of compassionate service to one another. And so we can return, together, to that football field where a conditioning coach barks his orders to “jump!” In mid-air, we find ourselves suspended. The chains of gravity have been severed in this moment of decision. As we hang, we hear the voice of Christ whispering a love into our hearts...

..A love that awakens an energy to run.

When we find ourselves on the ground again, we do not lumber forward under the bondage of punishment. We do not wait for a command to run—rather we strike out on a mission, energized with a love that propels us forward boldly; running with haste in the freedom of Christ. And as we turn to look over our shoulders, to see how we could have defied gravity, we see the only power that could have held us in the air, the only power that could have enlivened this love for others. There, behind us, is Christ elevated upon a cross.

From the cross Christ held us, though only for a moment, still long enough to change our hearts.

Thanks be to God. Amen.